

Q: It seems like my front teeth are gradually crowding in my adult years, despite that I had orthodontics as a teenager and wore my retainers faithfully for three years after. What can I do to stop the crowding? And is there any easy way to straighten them?

A: Before we talk about treatment options let's examine some possible causes. The first cause that comes to mind is an unstable bite. We have a saying in dentistry "Muscles always win!" Let me explain: The best "natural" orthodontic retainer is a balanced bite, whereby each lower tooth hits against each upper tooth with equal, opposing force. Without opposing "stops", your teeth can keep drifting until they find such opposing resistance. Hello crowding.

Second, you may be experiencing a natural occurrence called *mesial drift phenomenon*, whereby your front teeth slowly drift toward the midline, or center point. It is a slow creep, over many years, but frustrating for people who value straight teeth

Next, you and your dentist must rule out periodontal (gum) disease as a possible cause of drifting teeth. If the bone support is weak around the roots of your teeth, your consequences and treatment options might be much more detrimental than the appearance of crooked teeth. Consider some telling signs of advanced periodontal disease: long teeth (root exposure), dark, red or puffy gums, bleeding gums, bad odor or taste around your teeth, and/or loose teeth.

If periodontal disease is not the cause, you can consider orthodontic straightened again. For mild to moderate crowding, we can often "strip" the teeth, shaving the sides very slightly before straightening them with in a few months with removable, often invisible aligning appliances. For severe crowding, orthodontic movement would require braces--and possible extraction with brace--to create more space.

Veneers, or porcelain coverings, can create a very straight appearance in some cases as well. This option is faster than orthodontics, albeit more costly.

Regardless of your choice, to straighten or not, a bite balancing procedure, or *equilibration*, would certainly help you stabilize the drifting. And finally, a night time retainer, worn a couple times a week (for life), would insure the stability of your tooth position.